

## **“Islam and woman: where tradition meets modernity”: history and interpretations of Islamic women's status**

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### **HISTORY AND INTERPRETATIONS OF ISLAMIC WOMEN'S STATUS**

From 3000 B.C.-A.D. 1100, man's view of himself as superior in all ways to women soon became enshrined in the law and custom of the world's earliest civilizations, those of the Near East. Women became a chattel first of her father, then of her husband, then of her son.

--Reay Tannahill, 1982

The status of Islamic women differs among the various Islamic countries, each with its own view and considerations about women. In addition to the Arab countries all of which follow some form of Islam, there are many non-Arab Muslim countries in which the majority of the population is Muslim. Some include Afghanistan, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Turkey (3) (Armstrong, 2002; Naipaul, 1998). Only about 12% of Muslims worldwide are Arabs. For example, there are more Muslims in Indonesia than in all the Arab countries combined. Islam has a strong Arab quality, as Islam's holiest places are in the Middle East, and the Koran was originally written in Arabic.

It is estimated that there are between 0.7 and 1.2 billion Muslims worldwide, with almost 7 million alone in the United States. Approximately 21% of the world's population are followers of Islam. While Christianity is presently the largest religion and followed by 33% of all people, it has remained stable over many decades; Islam is still growing. If these current trends continue, by mid-twenty-first century, Islam may become the world's most popular religion. As Islam spreads, the different countries and their cultures may interpret Islamic religion and law differently, especially with regard to their attitudes toward women. This has made the picture of the Islamic woman a complex one. These include the basic Islamic rites and laws, different Islamic sects often with different interpretations of how these rites and laws are interpreted and carried out, as well as political structure in each of these countries.

Therefore, one must be careful not to either oversimplify or overgeneralize the picture of Islamic women because of changes in how Islam is viewed and the social changes currently

taking place in many of these countries. Nevertheless, most Islamic countries have specific beliefs about women and have restrictions concerning them.

## WHAT IS A MUSLIM?

The creed of Islam that came about from the teachings of Muhammad, its founder, has few "alterations or additions" (Noss, 1984, p. 698). The word Islam means "submission" or "surrender" (Adams, 1965). The basic fundamentals of Islam as set down in the Qur'an (Koran) are not so many and are within the reach of almost everyone. The way of life prescribed is based on practice and not theory with explicit acts that will assure his salvation. He is not asked to agree but to submit. Therefore, one who submits becomes a Muslim. When one states that he is a Muslim, that person means that he has committed himself to God. Since its creation, Islam has followed its one basic scripture, the Qur'an. The Qur'an, revealed to Muhammad (its prophet) about 610 C.E. (4) became the bible of the Muslims and has been preserved in its textual purity (Armstrong, 2002; Noss, 1984; Ringgren & Strom, 1967). Islam, in the beginning, was a challenge to other groups in the Arabian Peninsula, primarily the revealed and monotheistic religions of the Jews and Christians, with whom they fought significant battles. Nevertheless, the force of Islam and its clarity offered great attraction to those who supported and adopted it as the third revealed monotheistic religion after Judaism and Christianity.

## THE TWO MAIN BRANCHES OF ISLAM

The two main branches of Islam are the Sunni and the Shi'a Muslims. The difference between the two groups is based on the successor of the prophet Muhammad. This is a complicated issue but basically Sunni Muslims believe that Muhammad's successors were the elected religious leaders. Shi'a Muslims believe that Muhammad appointed Ali ibn Abi Taleb to be his successor. There are other differences, and new questions have arisen over the years. Within each branch (Sunni and Shi'a) there are separate groups and movements. In addition, other smaller branches (e.g. Sufi) have evolved. In the United States, Muslim unity often overcomes the pressures of the different divisions. Yet, with few exceptions, the majority of Muslims worldwide (including the United States) are Sunni. In Bahrain, Lebanon, and the non-Arab country of Iran, most Muslims are Shi'a. In Iraq, the majority are Shi'a but until the Iraq war they were completely repressed by Saddam Hussain.

## MUHAMMAD THE PROPHET AND THE TRANSITION FROM POLYTHEISM TO MONOTHEISM

During the early life of Muhammad, the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula was made up of seminomadic tribes. There was little unification among them; their main bond was the tribe. The land was inhospitable, resulting in the movement of the tribes from one area to the other along the peninsula to discover better climate and a place where they could procure food and water. These tribes followed a polytheistic religion and worshiped many gods, goddesses, demons, animals, as well as stones.

It has been estimated that Muhammad ibn Abdallah was born about 571 C.E. in Mecca, a small western town in Arabia, which would become the holiest site in the Islamic world. Muhammad's father died before Muhammad's birth, and his mother died when Muhammad was about 6 years old. At first, he was brought up by his paternal grandfather and then by his uncle, Abu Talib. Muhammad grew up in impoverished conditions and his early experience began to shape his attitudes toward the poor. As he developed, Muhammad came to understand and was disturbed by social inequities, the mistreatment of women and children, and by female infanticide (Carroll, 1983; Ringgren and Strom, 1967). He was taken on caravan trips with his uncle traveling as far as Syria and Palestine. It was during these trips that he became knowledgeable about the traditions of the Jews and Christians, which would influence his decisions in the development of Islam (Noss, 1956).

On the recommendation of his uncle, Muhammad was employed to manage a caravan for a rich widow, Khadija. Khadija admired his business ability and fell in love with him. Although she was 15 years older than Muhammad, they were married. It was said that Khadija influenced his attitudes toward the social problems of the time. Her wealth freed Muhammad from work and he was able to pursue his meditations about social problems. Khadija and Muhammad had six children (two sons and four daughters). Only his daughter, Fatima, lived to see her father's religion grow and spread throughout the region. Khadija died in 621 C.E. Throughout their marriage she was Muhammad's only wife. After Khadija's death Muhammad had four wives, which was permitted by the Qur'an (Carmody, 1989; Carroll, 1983; Noss, 1956). In 610 C.E., when Muhammad was about 40 years old he had an experience that was to change the history of the world. He was in a period of spiritual stress, concerned that there would be a crisis in Arab society. Arabs knew that the Judaic and Christian groups that

lived on the Arabian peninsula were more sophisticated and worshiped a deity they called the God and had a divine plan. But that God had not sent a prophet to the Arabs and there was no scripture in their own language. It appeared to many that the Arabs were lost people and were ignored by God himself.

### The Revelation

All this was to change. According to Muslim tradition, Muhammad entered a cave a short distance from Mecca, to fast and pray for several days. "One night ('The Night of Power and Excellence,' as Muslims call it) Muhammad woke to find himself overpowered by a devastating presence, which squeezed him tightly until he heard the first words of a new Arab's scripture pouring from his lips" (Armstrong, 2002, p. 3,4, Noss, 1956, p. 692). This was the beginning of the Qur'an as revealed to him.

Muhammad continued to have revelations but confided only to Khadija and her uncle Waraqa ibn Nawfal, a Christian. Both supported his belief and were certain that these revelations and visions came directly from God. Muhammad's wife became his first convert and later came to be known as the first mother of the faithful. Khadija's uncle firmly believed that Muhammad was the successor to Moses and that Muhammad was destined to become the long-awaited prophet of the Arab people for his God Allah.

It was only in 612 C.E. that Muhammad felt that he could start to preach about his revelations. He gradually began to gather converts. Muhammad's initial converts, which also included a significant number of women, came from the poorer tribes who were unhappy about the social inequities. But others, even members of Muhammad's own tribe, were hostile to his preaching.

Muhammad's preaching was a consistent monotheism (this verse is shown in Box 1.1.). (Denmark, Rabinowitz, Sechzer, 2000.)

### Conversion to Islam

Muhammad did not believe that he was founding a new religion. He thought that he was just bringing the old faith in One God to the Arabs, who never before had a prophet.

Muhammad also preached a simple message; it was wrong to amass riches but good to share these riches and develop a society that would respect the weak and vulnerable.

Muhammad was fearful that if his people did not change their ways, the society would disintegrate.

This was the core teaching of the new scripture, and came to be called the Qur'an (recitation) because the believers, most of whom, including Muhammad himself, were illiterate, imbibed its teachings by listening to public readings of its chapters (surahs) (Armstrong, 2002, p. 4.) During the next 21 years the Qur'an was gradually revealed to Muhammad, chapter by chapter, surah by surah. These revelations often came about when there was a community crisis or questions about serious matters. "News of this extraordinary 'supertribe' spread, and though at the outset nobody thought it had a chance of survival" (Armstrong, 2002, p. 14), it was to prove an inspiration to the people of the Arabian peninsula before Muhammad's death in 632 C.E.

More and more tribes began to follow Muhammad and convert to this new monotheistic religion. Muhammad was now considered "The Prophet." Many of the new believers were converted through the sheer beauty of the Qur'an inspiring them to change their whole way of life. The new sect would come to be called "Islam (surrender); a man or a woman who had made this submission of their entire being to Allah and his demand that human beings behave to one another with justice, equity and compassion" (Armstrong, 2002, p. 5). This decree was revolutionary for this time in the seventh century. In 622 C.E., when about 60 new believers moved to a town called Yathrib, Muhammad settled there with them. Yathrib would eventually be named after him as the Prophet's City, madinal an-nabi or Medina. Thus began the beginning of the Muhammad era and the beginning of Islam, the third of the revealed monotheistic religions after Judaism and Christianity. Muhammad's followers (the new religionists) had abandoned their old tribal groups in Mecca and their polytheistic worship. A strong enmity developed between these two groups and a holy war was initiated in the cause of their God, Allah. Muhammad and his new Islamites were powerful enough to defeat the Meccans and by 630 C.E. Mecca was completely conquered. Muhammad then began the ritual of the pilgrimage (the hajj) to the holy city of Mecca. This became a precedent for all rituals and still survives today. We have all seen these pilgrimages on television where thousands of Muslims stream into Mecca for this holy ritual. Muhammad died at the age of 59 on June 8, 632 C.E. in the town of Medina. He was buried in Mecca. By 632 C.E. Muhammad and the new Islamic religion had come to dominate over almost the

entire Arabian Peninsula.

Muhammad's revelations over 21 years are preserved as originally written in the Qur'an (meaning recitation or reading) or Koran. However, the entire Qur'an was completed some time after Muhammad's death through many writings and till then on oral tradition. (5) The volume of the Qur'an is comparable to the New Testament. The Qur'an, to faithful Muslims, is the very word of Allah, which was brought down and revealed to Muhammad, just as the Ten Commandments had been revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai (Armstrong, 2002; Ringgren & Strom, 1967). Throughout his life, Muhammad was always very sympathetic and supportive of women. And so, we need to look closely at the Qur'an and discern what this holy document meant for the status of Islamic women both during the formative period of Islam and in later times.

### The Doctrine of the Qur'an

In the doctrine of the Qur'an, the "absolute oneness of God is its principal tenet. There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet. This then is the basic Islamic creed. It tells that Allah is omnipotent and omniscient (all-powerful and all-knowing; Noss, 1956).

Polytheism and the Christian belief in the Trinity are denied. However, the Qur'an asserts that "there shall be no coercion in matters of faith" (Armstrong, 2002, p. 10) and also

"commands Muslims to respect the beliefs of Jews and Christians" (Armstrong, 2002, p. 10).

The Qur'an refers to Jews and Christians as ahl al kitab usually described as the "People of the Book" but in a more accurate translation would be "people of an earlier revelation" (Armstrong, 2002, p. 10). Everything depends upon the will of Allah. The Qur'an tells that there will be judgement and retribution (as in other religions) and that the good will surely enter Paradise but the wicked will be condemned to Hell. According to the Qur'an, the patriarchs of the Hebrews as well as Jesus are all to be considered prophets and are the recipients of revelations by Allah. But the absolute and perfect revelation came through Muhammad who is the last and final in the long progression of prophets.

### The Plan of Worship in Islam

The plan of worship involves the Five Pillars of Islam and describes the demands made of all adherents of Islam. These demands are as follows:

1. The Creed: There is no God but Allah.

2. The Ritual Prayer: It is now said 5 times a day.
3. Almsgiving: A kind of tithe for the poor and sick and for other purposes.
4. Fasting: Total abstinence from food or drink and sexual intercourse from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan (the ninth month in the Muslim calendar).
5. Pilgrimage to Mecca: This is obligatory for any believer once during his lifetime if he can possibly undertake it. (Noss & Noss, 1984; Parrinder, 1983). (6)

In the Qur'an, pork is considered unclean and is prohibited as are wine and gambling. While circumcision is not a custom according to the Qur'an, it is observed in nearly all Muslim countries (Noss, 1984; Ringgren & Strom, 1967).

### Early Islamic Law and The Status of Women

Many pagan practices previously observed in pre-Islamic Arabia were no longer mandated, while other practices were embraced by the new religion.

### Polyandry, Polygamy, and Control of Women

Both matriarchal and patriarchal systems were evident during Muhammad's pre-Islamic life. Before Islam, most married women retained blood kinship with their tribe. In some cases a woman was even able to find the protection of her own tribe if she was abused or mistreated by her husband. Yet, women were unhappy about their secondary status, their poverty, and mistreatment. Female infanticide was practiced. Polyandry (the state of having two or more husbands at the same time) was also a pre-Islamic custom. Under the new religion, the matriarchal system was abolished along with polyandry. Female infanticide was prohibited. Women were now controlled by their husbands and by their husbands' families; but in the beginning, this was not rigidly enforced (Ringgren & Strom, 1967). Muhammad had long been concerned about the treatment of women, especially of widows. Muhammad replaced polyandry with polygamy (the practice of having two or more wives); this came about during the time when so many Muslims were killed in the wars against Mecca and their widows were left unprotected. Men were allowed to take up to four wives, provided that they treat each with complete equality. As indicated earlier, Muhammad was familiar with rituals of the Jews and the Christians. He disapproved of the practice of celibacy in Christianity. And although he did not view women's menstruation as unclean nor did he consider menstrual

blood as polluting as in Judaism, he did order women not to pray during this time and prevented their attendance at the Mosque. Muslim physicians also questioned whether women should appear at the Mosque at all; most felt that women should not pray in the Mosque, but they were unable to enforce this because Muhammad allowed women to attend the Mosque and pray.

### Women and Their Religious Responsibility Under Muhammad

The Qur'an is quite explicit about the religious responsibility of women. Women were required to participate equally with men. In practice, it was not carried out. Some historical data indicate that Muhammad allowed women to pray with him in the Mosque, while others say that women could pray in the Mosque only with the presence and permission of their husbands and standing behind the rows of the men (Doi, 2002). Yet, the Qur'an gave women the rights of inheritance and divorce centuries earlier than such rights were accorded by Western countries. Although divorce under Islam was to the benefit of men, it was not to be taken hastily by husbands. The Qur'an allowed women to keep their dowries and departure of women after divorce was to be conducted with kindness and with no damage to the women's reputation. In pre-Islamic times, women were severely punished if they committed adultery. They were beaten or even stoned to death. This type of punishment was not stated in the Qur'an. The practice originated from the Torah of the Jews. It was however reinstated by the Taliban in Afghanistan in 1994, along with other severe restrictions and punishment of women, and will be discussed in detail in another paper in this issue. Muhammad moderated this practice and strongly encouraged his people to permit the accused to be forgiven because he felt it was better to err in forgiveness than in such severe punishment (Armstrong, 2002; Noss, 1974).

### Modesty

Modesty is the basic principle of dress for both men and women. The Qur'an tells believing men and women to "lower their gaze and guard their modesty" (Qur'an, 24:31-32). Women should not display their *zeenah* (charms, beauty, or ornaments); they should draw their *khimar* (veils) over their bosoms and should display their charms or beauty only to their husbands, fathers, and sons (and other family). Also, women should not strike their feet so as to draw attention to their hidden *zeenah* (Qur'an, 24:31-32).

The prophet's wives and daughters and believing women are instructed to draw over themselves their jilbab (outer garments) when in public so that they are recognized as decent women and not harassed. These are the few verses that address clothing specifically. Their importance is to guard his or her modesty and lower one's gaze to remain pure. This is enhanced by one's dress. The purpose of covering oneself is to be recognized as a decent woman and not harassed. The Qur'an is not really explicit about the form of one's dress except for women who are instructed to cover their breasts and put on outer garments so as to avoid harassment. The exact rules that have been established are based on interpretation of these verses. Inclusion of a head covering comes from interpretation of the word "khimar." It has been agreed that at the time of Muhammad, this was a loose scarf covering the woman's head, neck, and perhaps her shoulders, leaving the rest of her body exposed. So in the later enforcement of this rule, women had to use a khimar to cover their breasts as well. The interpretation of the khimar explains why Muslims believe that the Qur'an instructs women to cover their hair. This however is not specified in the Qur'an.

In addition to these rules, most Islamic scholars consider a woman's chest, hips, legs, neck, or basically her whole body as *zeenah*, all of which should be covered. Again, there is no specification in the Qur'an, allowing for different interpretations. The word *jilbab*, as used earlier, was understood to be loose-fitting clothing, more specifically, a long, loose dress or overcoat worn by many Muslim women today. Conforming to these rules would assure modesty and not draw attention to oneself and avoid enticing the opposite sex. This applies for both men and women. The rules for men are simpler; they must lower their gaze and cover themselves from their navel to their knees (Muslim Women's League, 2002).

### Veiling (Hijab)

The Qur'an does have specific instructions for the Prophet's wives. It provides for some degree of segregation and veiling for the Prophet's wives but does not require the veiling of all women, nor does it require the seclusion of women in a separate part of their homes (*purdah*) (Armstrong, 2002). The term *hijab* means "curtain" and is not used as an article of clothing. It refers to a screen behind which Muslims were to address the Prophet's wives. When the Prophet's wives went out in public the "screen" was a veil covering their face. At the time of the Prophet Muhammad, veiling was not adopted by other Muslim women, since, it was clearly a special injunction only for the Prophet's wives (Muslim Women's League,

2002). Some time after Muhammad's death these customs were gradually adopted and were extended to all women throughout Arab lands. In some communities, the word hijab may also refer to the head covering (Islam for Today, 2002; Muslim Women's League, 2002).

### The Status of Women After Muhammad

Conditions for women began to deteriorate under the rule of Umar, who succeeded Muhammad, and continued over the decades with Umar's subsequent successors.

In addition to the veiling of women, he began to limit women to praying at home, excluding them from the Mosque, even with the opposition from his own family. He essentially succeeded by appointing different imams (teachers) for men and for women. At first, he prevented Muhammad's wives from pilgrimages but later changed his mind. Umar also encouraged and supported the movement to exclude women from partaking in other religious and communal aspects of life. The practice of exclusion was a pivotal factor in the deterioration of the status of women in Islam. A second factor was the seclusion of women. Smith (1985), who has written extensively about Islam and women, has described seclusion as a process--which began precisely with Muhammad's relegation of his wives to a space apart from normal social interaction with men. They remained at home. Muhammad's wives were not allowed to converse directly with men but could only do so with a curtain between them. This type of seclusion (purdah) was subsequently spread to all Muslim women. This practice was enforced and led to a rapid withdrawal of women from society, resulting in an essentially male society. Thus, seclusion in this new religion of Islam ensured a diminished role for women. Smith has argued, however, that this custom of seclusion would not have been established had the prevailing attitudes of males toward women not been permitted; this custom certainly encouraged such a diminished state for women. The institution of seclusion behind a curtain, which was subsequently declared a divine revelation by Allah, seriously reduced freedom for women, and the limited freedoms that they had become virtually nonexistent.

The custom of veiling further diminished the status and role of the Islamic woman in the period of formative Islam. Women not only had to cover parts of their body to prevent enticement for men when they went out, they had to keep their face covered. Many women also felt they had to cover one of their eyes. These customs, after the death of Muhammad,

emphasized the obedience of women and worked to assure their chastity, making clear that their main value was procreation. These practices were soon acquired throughout most if not all Muslim lands (Haddad, 1985; Young, 1987).

### Withdrawal From Society

Although Muhammad was sympathetic to and supportive of women, at no time during his life or thereafter were women considered qualified to hold powerful positions in the new religion. Very few women were given responsibilities as collectors or for the conveying of the new traditions. Few if any women could be active in public affairs. The enforcement of exclusion and seclusion assured that women would not make gains in these areas. In her extensive writings, Smith (1985) has raised questions about the actual meaning of Islam for women. She felt that there were no truly definitive data to support the fact that the development of Islam and the social revolution that followed did in any way expand the opportunities for women that were not accessible in pre-Islamic Arabia. She strongly suggests that the development of Islam as a religiocultural system profoundly decreased the chances that women could partake of any role in public life. Once the codification of the laws of the Qur'an were taken as a divine revelation to the Prophet the enforcement of these degrading and demeaning practices was crucial in the exclusion of women. These practices, which were administered with little delay after the death of the Muhammad, can be considered as confirmation of the predominant attitude of men, that women were not suited to take an active role in public life or to serve in any way as leaders in their community. That women at the time showed a willingness to submit to these restrictions also signified that they accepted these restrictions as part of the divine revelation to Muhammad.

Yet there are others who are defensive about these criticisms. For example, Armstrong (2002) feels that emancipation of women was a great issue for Muhammad. One criticism is that the Qur'an teaches a double standard with regard to gender. The laws of inheritance show that a woman can only receive, one half of what her brothers receive, because they need to provide for a new family. With regard to being a witness before the law, the role of a woman as a witness is deemed only half as valuable as that of a man. Armstrong reminds us that life in the pre-Islamic period in Arabia included female infanticide as the norm, and where women absolutely had no rights. They were considered an inferior species and treated as slaves. So, when Muhammad established rights for women (not equal to men) the

unprecedented idea that a woman could inherit, or even something, or even had a role as a partial witness was astounding. Armstrong compares this with current times when "we are still campaigning for equal rights for women" (Armstrong, 2002, p. 191). Some feel that for women to wear the veil was a symbol of an unacceptable value system that debases women. But other women feel that wearing the veil identifies them as a Muslim, and defines their role in society and their relationship with men--giving them respect and recognition (Walker, 2002).

#### Current Issues Affecting the Status of Women

As noted earlier, Islam spread rapidly throughout Arabia and to the other countries of the Middle and Near East. It has also gained many converts among non-Arab people from Iran, Malaysia, Pakistan, and from Indonesia where in the 1970s only approximately 15% of the people were Muslims and which has now become the most popular Muslim country in the world. Clearly, Islam continues to spread throughout the world and beyond the Middle and Near East.

The family and the woman's role in Muslim societies has been affected by various laws and cultures in different countries in addition to the social, economic, and financial factors including increase in industrial and technological development and urbanization in societies, which until fairly recently were primarily rural and agriculturally based. These changes have been both positive and negative. For example, state health systems lowered infant and maternal mortality and increased life expectancy but as a result, increased population growth and burdens of childbearing, particularly among women in poor and rural communities. Although educational programs have been available to address widespread illiteracy, women have not yet benefitted from this to the same degree as have men. On the other hand, education of women from privileged classes has given these women a wider choice of alternatives and an altered perception of their roles in society and as women.

The issue of exclusion of women and their confinement or seclusion at home (which as noted earlier does not have Qur'anic support) has not proved practical in many poor countries. In most Islamic countries, Muslims cannot afford to confine women who are needed to work and help support the family. Women's detainment in their homes has come to be seen as an elite institution suitable for higher levels of society.

Notwithstanding these practical issues, the Permanent Council for Scientific Research and Legal Opinions (CRLO) was established in Saudi Arabia. It is the official institution entrusted with issuing Islamic legal opinions. Jurists represent all parts of the Islamic world. The Saudi government often adopts the legal opinion of the Council as the law of the land. Some of these deliberations concerned whether wearing a brassiere is permitted in Islamic Law or whether it is permissible for women to wear high heels. Brassieres are permissible for health or medical reasons while "high heels are not permitted by Islamic law because they emphasize a woman's thighs" (El Fadl, 2001, pp. 177-178). It is also unlawful for a woman to travel without a man's permission, leave the house alone, or drive. There are long lists of deliberations by the CRLO affecting women as well as men, and many laws in Islamic countries are based on these deliberations and legal opinions (El Fadl, 2001).

Now that the Taliban has fallen in Afghanistan the issue of women covering themselves completely with a "burqa" is not the law and is left to the woman herself or to her husband and family; yet many women are afraid to leave their homes without a veil or burqa.

In other current issues, there has been heightened discussion about the status of women in Islamic countries, which has intensified since September 11, 2001, and women's groups have been involved. Many important factors have brought about this development. Because of the increased ease of communication and transportation, Muslims are able to travel widely, read and watch television, and take advantage of much new information. On the one hand, many Muslims have come to perceive that their own institutions and religious doctrines are inadequate with regard to following the West. This has raised expectations and at the same time increased frustration due to the restricted freedoms in their country. On the other hand, "Muslims feel that they have lost touch with their own Islamic identity and tradition" (An-Naim, 2002) and want to return to more rigid Islamic ideology. A second factor is the change in self-awareness among women in Muslim countries and the demand for women's rights. Pal (2002) has described two simultaneous developments in several Islamic countries: (1) the State making anti-women laws in the name of Sharif (Muslim Law); (2) articulate and powerful women's movements in the respective countries are fighting against such laws. Some of these events are described here.

There are at present only two countries that mandate women to be covered--Saudi Arabia and Iran. Iranian women and men must maintain modest dress in the workplace. Women's

hair is considered erotic by Iranians and so covering hair as well as their female form is required. This prevents women from careers in physically active professions in a country where female equality in education is emphasized. For many centuries Iranian women wore the chador--a semicircular piece of dark cloth wrapped about the body and head and gathered at the chin. It permits the woman to wear anything she wants underneath but it is restricting because it must be held with one hand. Women have often used their teeth to hold the garment together. Since the Iranian revolution, dress has changed to long dress with long opaque stockings, a long sleeved coat, and head scarf. This again has evolved into a thin shoulder-to-ankle smock or "manto" after the French "manteau." In Iran, the women look at it as a work uniform and wear jeans or other Western dress underneath. However, Iran has recently tightened controls on the Islamic women's dress code. Robes deemed too revealing are banned. Shops have been stopped from producing and selling "immoral coats" that are body clinging and too short. Women must return to the loose-fitting, ankle-length clothes and cover their hair and neck with scarves. Apparently, Iran has periodic crackdowns after complaints by conservatives that women are flouting the dress code ("Anatomy of," 2003).

In Saudi Arabia where women are completely covered and wear the hijab or veil, women work alongside men. Many are highly educated and have professions in medicine, psychology, or other disciplines. They do not look at this mandatory covering negatively but feel that they achieve what Western women do. They feel that although they do not have as many rights they still deal with the same problems as Western women--juggling careers and families. One recent report regarding the health of veil-wearing Saudi women showed them to be at higher risk for respiratory disease than non-veil-wearing women. This study was carried out with 710 Saudi women at a hospital in Saudi Arabia. The extent of this problem is not yet known but perhaps will have an effect other than having women change their veils more frequently (Ahmad, 2001). Another aspect of Saudi law is that women are not allowed to drive. But human rights activists have demanded the withdrawal of this law.

In postwar Iraq, new concerns regarding the status of women are alarming. The Shi'a majority has become a powerful political force, calling for Islamic rule in that country. Iraqi women are frightened that hard-line Islamic beliefs will be enforced and seriously erode their freedom. Militant clerics have ordered that women be veiled, that the workplace and schools

be segregated, and that death-by-stoning be carried out for women who have sex out of wedlock, evoking a Taliban-like situation. Although these conservative groups are a minority, conditions in an unstable Iraq could change very quickly (Susman, 2003).

In other countries still, further events are taking place. The Nigerian State of Zamfara, recently introduced Sharif laws. One provision prevents women and men from traveling together in public transport, causing great problems for families. Shiite groups in that country have criticized this action in that the State does not have the constitutional authority to institute Sharif in a secular and multireligious state like Nigeria. In Kuwait, women are not allowed to vote or hold political office. A 2003 bill to give women this right was narrowly defeated but the fight is continuing. In 2000, Pakistan introduced a progressive law that would protect the human rights of women but was challenged by the federal Sharif court. The court directed the President to amend the law "so as to bring the provisions into conformity with the injunctions of Islam" (Pal, 2002).

A somewhat different state of affairs is taking place in Turkey. In this secular country where Sharif Law is banned, women are fighting for the right to wear a head scarf. Women have been barred from colleges because they refuse to remove their head scarfs; government employees have been fired, demoted, or transferred for the same reason. Women are barred from wearing head scarfs in photographs for drivers licenses (a similar case is ongoing in the United States). The government has taken legal action against writers and journalists who champion the spread of Islam. Thus, in this country, the "modest head scarf has become the object of one of Turkey's most divisive struggles as the country seeks to join the European Union and the globalized economy. The conflict leaves the country straining to balance greater democratic freedom with preserving a secular state in a region of expanding Islamic influence" (Moore, 2000).

Thus the struggle for and against women's rights in Islamic countries continues. As the turmoil in the Middle East goes on amidst terrorism and military action, and with the increasing influence of Islamic fundamentalists versus Western interests, the final status of Islamic women remains to be determined.

Box 1.1 A Qur'an Verse

Say Allah is One  
The Eternal God  
He begot none,  
Nor was he begotten  
None is equal to him

Koran 81.1-14 [cp. Rev.6.12-4] Pelican trs., p. 17, 11.3-11.

(1) Part of this paper was adapted from Denmark, Rabinowitz, and Sechzer (2000), with permission of Allyn & Bacon.

(3) Although 99.8% of the people are Muslim, Turkey was established as a secular state and as such does not adhere to Muslim law. Any political group/party that violates the Turkish secular system is declared unconstitutional.

(4) The designations B.C.E. (before the common era) and C.E. (common era), used originally in some circles to avoid the Christian references in the designation B.C. (before Christ) and A.D. (anno dominus, in the year of the Lord), have recently gained wider recognition and are most likely to be used more broadly in the future. Other than the Tannahill quotation, B.C.E. and C.E. are used in this paper.

(5) Muhammad's statements and recitations outside of the Qur'an are known as hadiths.

(6) Muhammad did not want a complete break with the past or with tribes of other faiths. He just wanted to bring the new revelations to the people of Arabia. So the new Muslims continued to make their usual pilgrimage (hajj) and carry out their ancient ritual at the Kabah, a cube-shaped shrine in Mecca, which was even then the most important center of worship in Arabia. The original meaning of the cult associated with the Kabah had long been forgotten but was still revered. They circled the shrine 7 times and kissed the black stone embedded in the Kabah wall. By the time of Muhammad, the acceptance of the new religion and the Qur'an, the shrine was venerated as the shrine of Allah. The pilgrimage continued as part of the doctrine of the Qur'an (Armstrong, 2002; Noss, 1956.)

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